

What Makes a Good Story?

Supporting Oral Narratives of Young Children From Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds

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All children come to school with the language and culture of their homes and communities. However, the formal uses of language in schools often favor children who speak in ways that meet teachers' expectations (Corson, 2001). For example, the story structure used by many children can be a mismatch with teachers' expectations, resulting in teacher and child frustration and the inability of some children to demonstrate their linguistic and cognitive skills. To ensure equity, early educators can consider diverse children's narratives from a difference rather than deficit perspective; that is, teachers can view the differences in these narratives as a strength, rather than as an indicator of a child's intrinsic lack of narrative ability. Teachers should seek out ways to support all children's storytelling (Jimenez-Silva, 1996; Jimenez-Silva & McCabe, 1996; McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

In this article, we discuss definitions and characteristics of children's narratives, the importance of young children's narrative skills, and cultural differences as illustrated by two children's example narratives. We demonstrate how knowledge of different types of culture-based story structure and a new pedagogical approach can help early educators support the narratives of young children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Definitions and Characteristics of Narratives

Children can choose from among several types of oral narratives, including event casts (i.e., telling what they are doing as they do it) (Westby, Moore, & Roman, 2002) and fictional narratives (i.e., recall of a

story read previously) (McCabe, Bliss, Barra, & Bennett, 2008). Here, we discuss those stories closest to children's experiences—personal narratives, descriptions or retellings of actual events experienced by the child or someone the child knows (Bliss & McCabe, 2008; Labov, 1972; Peterson & McCabe, 1983). In early childhood classrooms, children often can be heard narrating their experiences. During show-and-tell or sharing time, a child may talk about his/her play with a favorite puppet or about a recent family outing. Early educators may support and scaffold these children's stories, prompting them to provide greater detail. During these activities, peers typically listen quietly, although they may ask questions when the story is complete. At home, children's narratives include telling parents about their day at school or recounting for an uncle how they skinned a knee.

These narratives can be thought of as having several dimensions: topic maintenance, event sequencing, informativeness, referencing, conjunctive cohesion, and fluency (McCabe & Bliss, 2003). (See Table 1 for narrative dimensions and definitions.) We have focused on the first four of these dimensions, and on how children's age and development naturally affect their narrative competencies within these dimensions.

Importance of Children's Narratives

As noted by McCabe and Bliss (2003), narratives serve academic functions, particularly related to language and literacy development. Oral narratives are entry points to literacy for young children (Michaels, 1981). Telling a story requires planning, organization, meaning generation, and self-monitoring (Hadley, 1998), which are all skills needed for literacy. Indeed, studies have illustrated that children's narrative skills are positively related to literacy skills (e.g., Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001).

Additionally, children's oral narratives serve an important role in language socialization (McCabe & Bliss, 2003). At home, narratives are a primary source of interaction and language socialization within families and communities. Hymes (1974) asserted that starting from infancy, children learn culturally specific behaviors, including language use, through interactions with adults and other individuals. Adults' interactions (e.g., adults' oral narrative solicitations and ongoing prompts) serve as the basis for culturally appropriate language acquisition (Minami, 2002) and allow children to communicate, participate, and gain community acceptance (Heath, 1986). Moreover, narratives can function to transmit cultural beliefs and knowledge, build rapport,

**Narrative Dimensions and Definitions for Children With
Typical Language Development**
(Bliss & McCabe, 2008, pp. 163-165)

Dimensions of Narratives	Definitions and Characteristics
Topic Maintenance	Extent to which a child's utterances relate to a central theme or topic. Those utterances that do not maintain a topic may be tangential, irrelevant, or not considered an element of narration (e.g., some children may extend their speaking turn by describing plans or preferences).
Event Sequencing	Extent to which a child's narration of events is discussed in chronological order (e.g., "He fell down and was hurt").
Informativeness	Extent to which a child's narrative is considered complete includes three aspects: 1) discussing essential facts, telling optional details that elaborate the narrative, and using adverbs and adjectives for description; 2) presenting some type of action; and 3) providing the narrator's own subjective evaluation of an event's significance (e.g., "It was great"; "Oh my!").
Referencing	Extent to which locations, individuals, events, and/or features are appropriately identified in a child's narrative (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, as cited in Bliss & McCabe, 2008).

Table 1

and demonstrate affiliation with a listener (Crago, Eriks-Brophy, Pesco, & McAlpine, 1997). Narratives are a way children can reflect on, reshape, and understand their experiences (Dyson & Genishi, 1994), as well as represent themselves to other people (McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

Children bring their culture and community to school in the form of oral narratives. Unfortunately, children's narratives that meet teacher expectations generally are assessed more positively within U.S. schools. Typically, due in part to the limited cultural and linguistic diversity of most

early educators, well-accepted narratives tend to be those of children from what Barerra, Corso, and McPherson termed the "EuroAmerican Normative Culture" (p. xxi).

Teachers tend to have a narrative style in mind as they listen to children's stories. For example, Labov (1972) wrote that coherent, complete narratives contain description, action, and evaluation; Peterson and McCabe (1983) later coined the term "classic narrative" to identify this type of narrative so highly valued in the classroom. As a result, teachers are likely to negatively as-

Sample Narrative Characteristics of Children
From a Variety of Backgrounds*

Child's Background	Typical Narrative Characteristics
Latino/Hispanic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less emphasis on event sequencing (Jimenez-Silva & McCabe, 1996; Rodino et al., 1991) • Highlights extended family relationships to point out relationships to the child narrator (Jimenez-Silva & McCabe, 1996) • Emphasis on description, including description of what is typically considered tangential (Jimenez-Silva & McCabe, 1996) • Emphasizes engaging others in conversation rather than using a story-focused monologue (Meltzi, 2000) • Emphasis on background or habitual activities (e.g., "We were hitting the ball around") rather than past events (e.g., "We hit the ball") (McCabe & Bliss, 2003)
African American	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narratives may be lengthy (McCabe & Bliss, 2003) • Use of exaggeration, jokes, refrains, slang, and metaphor to tell an entertaining story (McCabe & Bliss, 2003) • Involves "topic-associating" (i.e., talk is connected to a single theme that may not be made explicit) rather than centering on a single topic (Michaels, 1982) • Frequent teasing as story component (Craddock-Willis & McCabe, 1996)
Asian/Asian American	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Succinct stories (Minami, 2002) • Fewer evaluative comments (e.g., "I liked it") (Minami, 2008) • Pronoun deletion (McCabe & Bliss, 2003) • Preference for implying rather than explaining (McCabe & Bliss, 2003)
Native American	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children may be reluctant to "perform" stories for others (Philips, 1983) • References to people and objects may appear ambiguous (Westby, Moore, & Roman, 2002) • Narratives structured in a "meandering style," which may not explicitly get to the point (Silliman, Diehl, Aurilio, Wilkinson, & Hammargren, 1995) • Spatially rather than chronologically organized (Silliman, Diehl, Aurilio, Wilkinson, & Hammargren, 1995) • Lengthy and complex (Kay-Raining Bird & Vetter, 1994)
European American	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narration of a single experience (McCabe & Bliss, 2003) • Description of a goal or problem (McCabe & Bliss, 2003) • Linear, succinct, chronologically sequenced (Bliss & McCabe, 2008; Silliman, Diehl, Aurilio, Wilkinson, & Hammargren, 1995)

* These characteristics may not be present in all cases. Other factors also may influence young children's narratives.

sess child narratives that have diverse, culturally influenced structures (Cazden, 2001), leading to unfair educational outcomes for these children (Corson, 2001). Additionally, because certain narrative characteristics of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds can be so different from educators' expectations, the teachers may inappropriately refer the children for special education evaluation.

Impact of Diversity on Children's Narratives

Individuals' oral narrative characteristics can vary from one culture to another (Cazden, 2001; Corson, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Fiestas & Peña, 2004; Melzi, 2000). In addition, individuals from many diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may have limited home and community experience with the classic type of narrative expected in educational contexts (Westby et al., 2002). Researchers have identified structural and organizational norms based on culture and community narrative, including norms of individuals from Latino (Jimenez-Silva, 1996; Jimenez-Silva & McCabe, 1996; McCabe & Bliss, 2003; Rodino,

Gimbert, Perez, Craddock-Willis, & McCabe, 1991); African American (Heath, 1982; Michaels, 1981; Nichols, 1989; Price, Roberts, & Jackson, 2006); Asian/Asian American (Kim, 2003; Kim & Johnson, 2007; Lofranco, Peña, & Bedore, 2006; Minami, 2008; Minami & McCabe, 1995); and Native American (Lindsay, 1992; Philips, 1983; Silliman, Diehl, Aurilio, Wilkinson, & Hammargren, 1995; Westby et al., 2002) backgrounds. Of course, early educators cannot assume that children from particular cultural/ethnic groups will align with any specific narrative features, given the influences on language socialization of many other variables, including socioeconomic status (Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005), "mainstream" cultural affiliation (Kay-Raining Bird & Vetter, 1994), formal school experience, and residency in the United States. Additionally, children from diverse cultural backgrounds may use a greater variety of narrative characteristics than presented here as a function of their narrative purposes (Champion, 2003).

Cultural Differences in Two Children's Example Narratives

Nonetheless, beginning with culture-based narrative characteristics can be fruitful as a step toward learning more about individual children's home, community, and associated narrative styles. Studies investigating children's narratives illustrate common storytelling tendencies that have been linked to their cultures and communities (see Table 2, based in part on McCabe & Bliss, 2003). Of course, not all children will exhibit the typical narrative characteristics listed here, given the diversity that exists within their cultures.

In this section, we first present a European American child's narrative to show common narrative characteristics typically expected in school settings. Next, to illustrate culturally based narrative differences, we present a comparable Latina child's narrative. We also discuss four research-based narrative characteristics (i.e., topic maintenance, event sequencing, informativeness, and referencing) (see Table 1).

European American children tend to tell narratives in ways that closely meet most U.S. early educators' expectations, as illustrated in the narrative of a 7-year-old, European American girl presented in Figure 1. The first narrative characteristic on which we will focus is topic maintenance, which "refers to the relation of utterances to a central topic or theme" (Bliss & McCabe, 2008, p. 163). In this example, the child demonstrated topic maintenance throughout the narra-

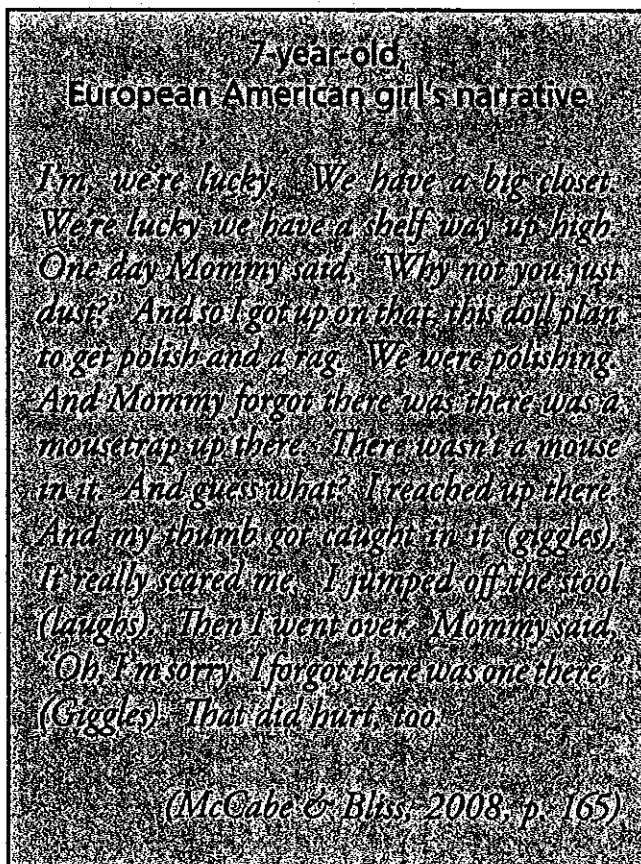


Figure 1

tive as she focused on one single topic, which can be summarized by her statement “and my thumb got caught in it [mousetrap].”

A second narrative characteristic is event sequencing, which refers to the presentation of events in a logical or chronological order (McCabe & Bliss, 2003). The European American girl presented her story in a linear fashion. She described how there was a high shelf in her closet and proceeded to narrate sequenced events. She was asked to dust the shelf; she prepared to dust; her mother did not warn her about a mousetrap, because “Mommy forgot there was a mousetrap up there”; she had her thumb caught in the trap; and her mother apologized. She ended her story by saying, “That did hurt, too.” As stated, the events presented are told in a plausible logical or chronological order.

Informativeness, which refers to the extent to which a narrative presents the essential facts of a specific experience and how well it presents optional details that serve to elaborate the narrative (McCabe & Bliss, 2003), is the third narrative characteristic. Informativeness also refers to how much description, action, and evaluation is included in the narrative (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). In the example, the European American girl presented all the essential facts of her experience, as well as optional details that helped the reader get a more complete picture of her adventure. She also provided description (e.g., “We have a big closet”), action (e.g., “I jumped off the stool”), and evaluation (e.g., “It really scared me”) statements.

A final characteristic of narratives is referencing, which addresses the appropriate identification of individuals, features, locations, and events (Bliss & McCabe, 2008; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In the narrative presented in Figure 1, all references were clear and relevant. For instance, there was no ambiguity as to whom the child was referring when she stated, “We were polishing,” nor when she stated, “It scared me.”

In contrast, in the Latina girl’s narrative, presented in Figure 2, we see that a broad definition

of the first narrative characteristic—topic maintenance—applies. As is typical of narratives of Mexican American individuals (Jimenez-Silva, 1996), as well as those from Caribbean and South American cultures (Rodino et al., 1991), the girl frequently mentioned and described family members (e.g., siblings, uncles, aunts). She used references to family members—including cousins, aunt, grandpa, and grandma—to orient the listener and situate the narrator, another common feature of Latino narratives (Rodino et al., 1991). For someone outside of the culture, the topic may not appear to be maintained, but if the listener is aware of the purpose of interjecting family members, he or she may come to understand that these references to family are as central to the story as any other topic (Jimenez-Silva, 1996). Teachers often see this flood of names as distracting to the main storyline; yet, this emphasis on family relations reflects a valuing of family within the Latino culture (Jimenez-Silva, 1996).

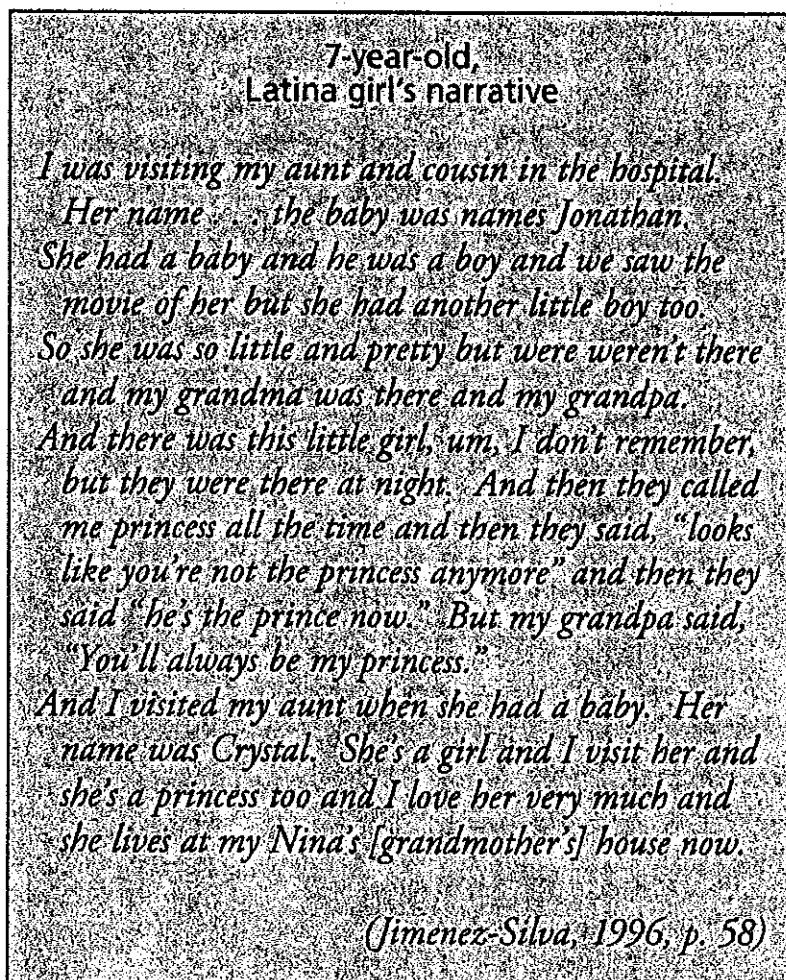


Figure 2

The second narrative characteristic, event sequencing, is not typically emphasized in Latino narratives, in part because Latino parents often do not stress this aspect when modeling or scaffolding narratives with children at home. Jimenez-Silva and McCabe (1996) found that for some speakers, habitual activities are often included instead of descriptions of a specific past event (e.g., "We were visiting"). In the Latina girl's narrative, chronological order was indeed difficult to decipher, because it is typically not a primary focus of Latino narrative.

Informativeness, the third narrative dimension, also needs to be examined through a cultural lens. As McCabe and Bliss (2003) caution, "Informativeness must be reevaluated in light of what is known about Spanish narration" (p. 166). In other words, teachers need to understand the purpose behind the telling of a narrative. The point of the story told by the Latina child may be to let her listeners know about her family (Jimenez-Silva, 1996). Therefore, the emphasis may not be on recounting events. However, to some degree, she did recount events, as seen in various clauses of her narrative that could be categorized as description (e.g., "at night"), action (e.g., "I was visiting"), and evaluation (e.g., "so little and pretty"). Overall, most listeners from this child's culture are unlikely to feel that key events are missing from the recounted experiences.

Some influences of the Spanish language were found regarding a final narrative characteristic—referencing—as the Latina girl recounted her narrative in her second, albeit dominant, language (English). For example, she stated, "The baby was names Jonathan," instead of using the grammatically correct term "named." It is not always clear to whom she referred when using the pronouns "he," "she," and "they" throughout the story. In Spanish, speakers do not need to indicate to whom a pronoun refers once it has been referenced in a previous part of the conversation (Gutierrez-Clellen & Heinrich-Ramos, 1993).

The two example narratives provided above show that children tell narratives based on their own culturally and community-based norms, and these can be quite different from one another. Importantly, no one narrative style is actually better than another.

Recommendations To Support Narratives

Children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds need to be able to function in both their home culture and the culture of formal

schooling. Early educators are critical to supporting children as they straddle two cultures by accepting children's home-culture behaviors (e.g., language use) while supporting their acquisition of expected school-based behaviors (Cheatham & Santos, 2005). To this point, we present three recommendations for early educators.

First, early educators are constantly assessing children's skills during their daily interactions with children, including during children's storytelling. Because narratives can differ based on culture, early educators should be wary of quickly referring children for special education assessment and placement due to narrative differences. Some aspects of the narratives of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may resemble those of children with disabilities (Bliss & McCabe, 2008; Epstein & Phillips, 2009; Reilly, Losh, Bellugi, & Wulfeck, 2004). Instead, early educators can gather more information about children's home-based narratives (e.g., topic maintenance, informativeness, event sequencing, referencing) from teacher training materials (e.g., McCabe, 1996; McCabe & Bliss, 2003). Additionally, early educators can engage parents and families in discussions of the kinds of storytelling done in the home and the ways in which family members support storytelling (e.g., prompts, scaffolds). Cultural informants also can provide information about narrative types and structures commonly performed in homes. These strategies are designed to support teachers' understandings of the wide variation in their young students' narrative styles and what should be considered a culturally based narrative difference, rather than a disability.

Second, early educators can place importance on children acquiring and developing their home-based narrative styles (Jimenez-Silva & McCabe, 1996). Teachers can provide children with opportunities to tell stories using their culturally based narrative styles (e.g., when teachers prompt children to talk about their weekend), being certain to tell children that they may tell their stories in any way they wish. Another way to support children's culturally based storytelling styles is for community members and parents to read books and tell stories in class that reflect diverse narrative traditions. Additionally, teachers can encourage children to talk about their home and community lives, which can result in lengthier and more complex stories (de la Luz Reyes, 1991). Early educators also can encourage parents to engage in more frequent storytelling to provide children with home-based narra-

rive models, and to provide children themselves with opportunities to tell more stories at home (Harris-Martine, 1991).

Third, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds need explicit explanation of school expectations to ensure their full participation in schooling (Bliss & McCabe, 2008; Delpit, 1988). Consequently, teachers need to tell them that their language and culture are unique and wonderful, but that they also have to learn how to master another set of rules. Early educators can explicitly teach children how to tell "classic narratives," thereby helping them succeed academically (Westby et al., 2002). To do so, early educators can first pre-teach the term "classic narrative" and its expected characteristics (e.g., talk about a single topic, discuss it in chronological sequence from past to present) by using prompts, diagrams, and discussions, and by providing classic narrative models.

Next, because teachers will provide opportunities in class for many types of narratives, teachers also must clearly tell children *when* they are expected to perform classic narratives (e.g., "OK, children, today when I ask you to tell me about a time you were hurt, I'd like you to use what we called 'classic narrative.' Do you remember that?"). Additionally, teachers can scaffold children's performance of classic narratives as they tell stories (Bliss & McCabe, 2008). To prevent children from getting frustrated, children should be reminded that the teacher may need to occasionally interrupt them (e.g., "Remember to continue talking about just one topic") to keep their talk focused on classic narrative characteristics (e.g., topic maintenance, informativeness). Feedback and opportunities for discussion will be important to support children as they learn to deliver classic narratives.

Conclusion

Young children's narratives are important not only to language and literacy development, but also to their socialization and culture learning. As narratives can differ significantly according to children's home and community cultures, early educators should ensure that young children's home narrative styles are supported as they also support learning of the classic narrative styles that are expected in formal schooling. By providing opportunities and support for children to develop various types of narrative styles, we can help children gain an appreciation for multiple definitions of a good story. Furthermore, by providing them with the knowledge of when "classical narratives"

are the expected format in school (e.g., responding to prompts on a standardized test), we can give young children the tools to be academically successful while maintaining and valuing their home-based language and traditions.

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